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Electoral authoritarianism in Malaysia: trajectory shift

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Abstract   This paper proposes an analytical framework by which to understand the origins, functioning, and dynamics of electoral authoritarianism in Malaysia. It thus explores notions of historical legacies, structural pressures, critical junctures, and institutional formation. But in guarding against teleology, it also considers elite agency and 'stunning elections'. This framework is applied in the case of Malaysia because, in anticipating contemporary trends, the country has so long perpetuated a paradigmatic electoral authoritarian regime. And yet, with many countries growing similarly authoritarian today, Malaysia has suddenly become less so, with the government having been dealt a startling setback in its latest contest, held in March 2008, thus losing its extraordinary majority in parliament and control over five states. Hence, if democratization once again gains steam round the world, Malaysia may presage this trend too, with its electoral authoritarianism, long so resilient, perhaps poised today on the edge of transition.

Keywords   Malaysia; electoral authoritarianism; democratization; critical junctures; elites.

During the mid-1990s, while democratization continued to gather pace, Southeast Asia was dismissed as anomalous, the world's 'most recalcitrant region' (Emmerson 1995). Soon afterward, however, as Southeast Asia's authoritarianism was softened up by financial meltdown, it grew more open to democracy's progress. A momentous transition thus unfolded in Indonesia, the quality of Thailand's new democracy was raised by a 'people's constitution', and democracy in the Philippines seemed consolidated by a presidential election toward the end of the decade, marking the passage of the 'two-turnover test' (Huntington 1991: 266–7). What is more, even Malaysia,

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its authoritarian rule distinguished by more than 30 years of rock solid continuity, was shaken during this period by a new social reform movement and an invigorated opposition front (Weiss 2005).

But 10 years on, in parallel with much of the developing world, democratic change across most of Southeast Asia has stalled. In Indonesia, the writ of elected officials has yet to extend to the military (Beeson 2008). In Thailand, the military ousted the government and imposed a new constitution, one under which its appointees have remained in the assembly's upper house, notwithstanding democracy's seeming return (Ockey 2008). Further, in the Philippines, democracy has been corroded by electoral cheating, political corruption, and severe violations of human rights (Hutchcroft 2008). And in Malaysia, the reform movement wilted and the opposition front broke up, enabling authoritarian rule to re-equilibrate.

But in re-equilibrating, rather than oscillating, Malaysia's regime type, variously conceptualized as 'electoral', 'competitive', and 'semi-' authoritarianism (Schedler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2002; Ottaway 2003), is distinguished among our other Southeast Asian cases by its persistence. Bracketed by harder forms of authoritarian rule and liberal democratic politics, this regime has mostly avoided steadfast coercion. Indeed, the country's dominant party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), has regularly held multi-party elections. And it has refrained from grossly rigging or stealing these elections, instead perpetuating its dominance through subtler stratagems for more than three decades.

Elsewhere in the developing world, governments have halted or rolled back their recent democratic progress, aspiring similarly to electoral authoritarianism. Their motivations are plain. In trying to balance timeless desires to cling to power with the new valorisation of civil society and popular sovereignty, they dampen the competitiveness of elections in order to perpetuate their incumbency, but fabricate enough uncertainty that they draw some legitimating cover. In this way, they may reduce both the high costs of repression and the grave risks of openness.

But while alloying controls with procedures, governments sometimes find that their electoral authoritarianism fails to gain the sturdiness that hybridity implies. Accordingly, Levitsky and Way (2002) record a lengthening roster of governments in Africa, Central America and Eastern Europe that have manipulated elections, yet been 'stunned' by the results. Thus, if the reasons that governments choose electoral authoritarianism are clear, the setbacks they sometimes incur show that this regime type depends on more than elite-level preferences and skill sets, encouraging new research into the underlying conditions in which elections are 'regime-sustaining' or 'regime-subverting' (Schedler 2002a: 49).

This paper, then, while acknowledging the causal importance of elite choices, examines the deeper matrices of factors in which electoral authoritarianism must find roots if it is to grow resilient. And it asks questions too about how, even where it has persisted for long periods, electoral authoritarianism might finally be changed. In doing this, the analysis focuses

on Malaysia, a country which, in anticipating contemporary trends, has long perpetuated an electoral authoritarian regime. And yet, if many countries are growing similarly authoritarian today, Malaysia has suddenly become less so. As noted above, its regime was tested during the late 1990s. And though recovering smartly during an election in 2004, the government was dealt a far more startling setback in its latest contest, held in March 2008, losing its extraordinary majority in parliament and control over five states. Indeed, Meredith Weiss (forthcoming) recounts that the results have popularly been interpreted as the opposition's 'historic "victory"'. Thus, if democracy once again gains steam round the world, Malaysia may presage this trend too, with its electoral authoritarianism, long so resilient, perhaps poised today on the edge of transition.

Analytical 'funnelling'

This paper deploys a sequence of analytical models through which primarily to understand electoral authoritarianism in Malaysia. But it seeks also to make wider theoretical advances. It begins by charting the broad parameters which, with varying flexibility, are imposed on a country's political trajectory by historical legacies and structural pressures. Critical junctures also set in, branching points at which alternate by-ways are closed off. Thus, along a trajectory bordered by legacies and pressures, then more finely delimited by side closures, institutions take root, the most important of which cumulate in a state apparatus. Further, within the state's shadow, connected business conglomerates appear, especially in distinctive conditions of late, but rapid industrialization.

Next, analysis turns to elites, their statuses and organizational power underpinned by the institutions of which the state and conglomerates are made up. Institutions also delineate the arenas in which elites compete for state and business resources, necessary for gratifying close retinues and energizing wider followings. Further, the intensity with which elites then wage their competitions, graded along a continuum from unity and restraint to disunity and open warring, determines the extent to which political regimes grow resilient. And the latitude with which their positional tenures and policy choices can be decided by mass-level constituents shapes the authoritarian or democratic character of regimes. More concretely, where civil liberties and electoral competitiveness are seriously truncated, hard authoritarianism sets in. Where both these dimensions are respected, liberal democracy prevails. And where, as in Malaysia, civil liberties and electoral competitiveness are dampened, though not extinguished, an intermediate form of electoral authoritarianism persists.

Hence, in trying to account for electoral authoritarianism's resilience in Malaysia and the prospects for change today, this paper waxes eclectically. It constructs a diachronic framework, though one whose linearity is relieved by a successive deployment of 'narrowing' models, steadily funnelling explanation toward Malaysia's regime type. Thus, it tracks the

country's developmental trajectory through historical legacies, structural pressures, critical junctures, and the formation of institutions. Further, in guarding against teleology, it spotlights agency through elite analysis. And at the trajectory's end, it uncovers the independent causality that regimes can pose through a short critique of authoritarian 'durability' and some reference to 'stunning' elections.

Legacies and pressures

In contributing to O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead's classic volume on voluntarist action and democratic transitions, Adam Przeworski (1986) questioned the analytical worth of structural models. Though structures may delimit an outer range of choice, they are unable to specify more closely the ways in which elites and constituents finally behave. However, by constructing a framework in which historical legacies and structural pressures are brought into prominence, they are asked to do no more. After they have identified the origins and initial direction of a developmental trajectory, finer models can be applied successively, narrowing the strait through which voluntarism must pass.

Historical legacies

Weighty historical legacies that have profoundly shaped Malaysia's trajectory can be traced to British colonial rule. But if this experience was highly transformative, its principal strands have been contrary in their effects. On the authoritarian side of the ledger, three-quarters of a century of British rule introduced what Larry Diamond (1989: 13) has labelled as the 'vice-regal tradition', wherein colonial overlords and their compatriot investors forged powerful state apparatuses geared mainly to administrative domination and resource extraction. Further, within their Malayan possession, the British cloaked their state apparatus with indigenous authority structures involving sultans, rajas and headmen. Restrictions were also placed on independent political and labour organizing, while policies of 'imperial preference' and land 'reservation' distorted patterns of market competitiveness and ownership.

But on the other side of the ledger, this vice-regal tradition was in some degree offset in some measure by a British 'tutelary model'. As Myron Weiner (1987) recounts, though the bureaucratic hierarchies that had been imposed by the British were geared to domination, their internal workings were governed by regulatory codes over positional responsibilities and advancement. Indigenous cadets in the Malay Administrative Service and ethnic Chinese recruits to the Straits Settlements Colonial Service were therein exposed to norms that militated against arbitrariness and personalism, hence promoting rule of law and accountability.

In addition, during the 1950s, as the British began to decamp, they methodically staged elections, graduating from municipal to national councils.

Electoral procedures, a multi-party system, and representative assemblies were thus put in place, providing the arenas in which elites might peacefully compete for state positions and resources by appealing to constituent sentiments. In doing this, the British etched their legacy of administrative domination with avenues for accountability, participation, and representativeness.

Structural pressures

But more than historical legacies, British colonial experience also unleashed structural pressures which, in framing lasting dilemmas over development strategies and social relations, have held equally mixed implications for Malaysia's political trajectory. In terms of development, colonial-era officials and investors, in their unswerving commitment to resource extraction, pursued plantation agriculture and mining on a wide scale. Malaysia was thus destined for late-industrialization, the remedy for which the government would, during the decades after independence, seek in new kinds of foreign investment in export manufacturing, twinned with heavy campaigns of secondary import substitution. Thus, the government's disaggregation of labour to oblige foreign investors, as well as its diversion of revenues to local industry strongly encouraged authoritarian rule. So too would the scandals and popular outrage that would result from staggering misallocations of investment capital, prompting the government's adoption of 'draconian amendments' by which to stifle communication and protest (Munro-Kua 1996).

But even as Malaysia's government has obliged foreign investors with authoritarian controls, it has been pressed by Western foreign ministries, international labour organizations, democracy promoters and human rights advocates to roll them back. Of course, the government has mostly ignored these voices. And they were drowned out altogether by US applause for the government's detention of local Islamists at the time of September 11 (Capie and Acharya 2002: 10). But they continue to resonate with many of the civil society organizations in Malaysia that rapid industrialization and social change have incubated, transposing exogenous pressures into local ideational ones. NGOs and academic researchers gain funding from sundry international agencies. Opposition parties and multitudes of bloggers disseminate critical reports from the US State Department, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and various raters of government corruption, media independence, and economic competitiveness. Accordingly, the structural pressures that reverberate through global markets for profit-making and ideational exchanges impact contrarily on Malaysia, at once encouraging both authoritarian rule and democratic politics.

Also traceable to the legacies of British colonial experience is Malaysia's divided or pluralistic society, the features of which instigate new kinds of structural pressures. Briefly, with the Malay community having mostly

stood aloof from modern plantation and mining sectors, colonial-era officials turned to large numbers of workers from China and India. New social divisions were then swiftly rigidified in differential political statuses and occupational roles. The indigenous and thus 'sovereign' Malay community remained politically privileged, with its sultans possessing at least nominal royal prerogatives, its aristocrats enjoying mid-level recruitment into the civil service, and its peasants and fishermen gaining 'protection' in their agrarian and coastal redoubts. Meanwhile, 'immigrant' Chinese and Indians were regarded as sojourners and so, politically excluded. However, through vigorous market activities, many Chinese and Indians gained economic standing, rising in business, the professions, and urban artisanry. In this context, ethnic affiliations and rivalries set in, inviting top-down strategies of control, while weakening class-based awareness and resistance, hence favouring authoritarian rule.

However, Samuel Huntington (1984: 202–3) once argued, prior to his averring the determinacy of sectarian frictions and clashing, that a 'widely differentiated and articulated social structure', composed of 'autonomous and ethnic and religious groups', strongly repulsed authoritarian rule. Specifically, in their many identities, these groups erect cultural baffles that hinder invasive state power. Indeed, wrote Huntington, they effectively turn the table, providing the basis for 'control of the state by society, and hence for democratic political institutions as the most effective means of exercising that control'. It is, then, societies that lack these group identities and dynamics that are 'likely to be dominated by a centralized power apparatus [and] an authoritarian or totalitarian dictatorship' (ibid.: 203).

These observations about the mixed implications for regime outcomes that are posed by late, but rapid industrialization and divided or plural societies can be extended to other structural categories in Malaysia. For example, countervailing pressures emerge from the country's new urban middle class. Many of its members have been freed from their dependence on the state by general economic growth. But they remain divided ethnically and cautioned politically by the vast social sub-strata pulsing beneath them.

Further, on a cultural plane, deep clientelist outlooks persist in Malaysia. Thus, in urban centres, politicians and businessmen still clamour for the honorifics that sultans bestow. And in rural areas, entrenched patterns of village-level deference are parsed in a local literature as 'Malay feudalism' and UMNO 'protectors' (Muzaffar 1979). But Malaysia is also the site of the Emergency, one of Southeast Asia's major insurgencies during the late 1940s–1950s, pitting ethnic Chinese guerrillas, sometimes in alliance with radical Malay intellectuals, against their own communal leaders and British officials (Stubbs 1989). Further, the May 13th incident, an outbreak of post-electoral violence in 1969, this time pitting the Malays against the Chinese, can be understood as a mass-based upsurge against remote 'consociational' elites and the structures of ethnic 'pillarization' through which they were managed (see Lijphart 1969).

Accordingly, evenly poised historical legacies and structural pressures define a first phase in Malaysia's developmental trajectory. Of course, even with careful analysis, it is difficult to gauge their precise causal weight. But at a base level, these legacies and structures can nonetheless be interpreted as distinctly countervailing, rather than as simply ambiguous. Thus, as they press from contrary directions, they begin to forge a factor matrix which, in encouraging both authoritarian rule and democratic politics, produces something in between, rather than blandly cumulating in a random context wherein anything might happen.

Thus, in commencing this approach, we begin by reviewing some of the legacies and pressures that contribute first to the matrix of factors from which Malaysia's electoral authoritarianism derives. It shows that on many counts, these factors are countervailing, helping constrain regime outcomes to an intermediate posture.

Closures and incentives

Though historical legacies and structural pressures border a developmental trajectory only loosely, the tools of path dependence and critical juncture theory enable us more rigorously, within a broad temporal sweep, to identify alternate routes of development that have been closed off. Thus, we see the ways too in which as the trajectory is narrowed institutions emerge, imposing additional form and, in a tight interpretation of critical junctures, long continuities, rather than dialectical vagaries (Pierson 2000).[1] In Malaysia, then, institutions convey more finely the mixed implications for regime outcomes that have been posed by countervailing legacies and pressures. They do this by ordering elite behaviours in ways that are bounded, yet only laxly, hence ceding voluntarist space.

This section recounts two critical junctures at which, in Malaysia's political record, the terrain is further refined, enabling institutions to take root. These two events – the Malayan Union controversy and the May 13th incident – have been widely recounted. They need only be rehearsed here briefly, then, in order to identify critical junctures, side-route closures, and institutional formation.

The Malayan Union controversy

After World War II, as the British readied Malaya for independence, they made a fateful decision to rationalize their patchwork of administrative units and the uneven statuses of ethnic communities into a more uniform and equitable arrangement that they labelled the Malayan Union (Allen 1967; Stockwell 1979). Under this scheme's provisions, the 'sovereign' status of the Malay sultans and their ethnic following, however nominal, would be reduced. At the same time, the sojourner status of the Chinese community would be upgraded with equal citizenship rights. But aristocratic Malay

civil servants, fearing the weakening of their prerogatives, reacted by holding a series of meetings and mass rallies which, in galvanizing their followings, led to the formation of UMNO. Taken aback by the vehemence of this social upsurge, the British rescinded the Union scheme. They then unveiled a federalist system, under which the statuses of the sultans and the 'special rights' of the Malays were reasserted.

Further, as UMNO evolved from a 'vehicle of protest' into a 'full-fledged Malay political party' (Horowitz 2000: 399), its exclusionary ethnic character imposed a similar logic on other parties that emerged in its wake. Put simply, with the Malays largely mobilized through UMNO, only non-Malays remained available for recruitment by other new parties. In the first instance, this involved the MCA (Malayan Chinese Association) and the MIC (Malayan Indian Congress). However, in preparing to contest a series of municipal elections that were staged by the British during the early 1950s, UMNO, whose Malay followings were mainly rural, made local deals with the MCA, as its Chinese followings were predominantly urban. In this way, these parties maintained their distinct communal identities, yet bettered their electoral prospects.

Accordingly, even as the British tried again to override structural pressures by encouraging multiethnic parties (Horowitz 2000: 401, fn. 8), the one such vehicle that cropped up, the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), attracted little popular favour. Together, UMNO and the MCA won 26 of 34 seats in the municipal elections that were held, encouraging them to join formally, along with the MIC, in a coalition that they first labelled the Alliance, later the National Front (*Barisan Nasional*). The IMP, then, was 'consigned to oblivion' (Horowitz 2000: 401). Indeed, after independence, another half-century would pass before any serious multiethnic party would reappear in opposition. Meanwhile, the Alliance or its successor would go on to win the country's every general election.

Thus, the Union controversy, in its closure of any side-route leading to a multiethnic party system, ratcheted Malaysia's developmental trajectory forward. Its amounting to a critical juncture, then, is made plain by its avoidance of any methodological dilemma of 'infinite historical regress', a syndrome whereby each seemingly transformative occurrence that analysts unearth can be tracked back to a previous one in an endless chain of causality (see Pierson 2000: 263). Rather, the imposition of the Union, a marked attempt to ignore historical legacies and structural pressures, drew an overwhelming communal reaction that gave new rigidity to ethnic affiliations and rivalries.

Further, the Union controversy was no small, but fortuitously timed occurrence that would only slowly gain determinative weight. In amounting to a critical juncture, rather than a mere increment of path dependence, it constituted a 'big' event. Even more than thrusting Malaysia's developmental trajectory forward, then, it articulated a new institutional landscape of communally ordered parties. Highly activated Malay civil servants

and mobilized followings pushed past their effete sultans, finding new institutional solidity in UMNO. And hence, they drove the Chinese and the smaller Indian community to organize similarly, forming the MCA and the MIC. A communally ordered party system was in this way set nearly in stone.

Some local scholars, of course, critique this interpretation of Malaysia's political system as over-determined. Mavis Putucheary (2005: 3) contends that 'our ethnicized political system [was not] the only possible response to ...irreversible history'. Rather, she argues, while UMNO's 'aristocratic politicians' surely favoured this system in order to safeguard their standings, radical Malay nationalist parties, 'avowedly anti-colonial and egalitarian', initially supported the Malayan Union, an arrangement through which they might more effectively have pursued their levelling agendas. Putucheary (ibid.: 4) also recalls the early 'success' of the Labour Party–Socialist Front, a cross-ethnic coalition, in winning the George Town Municipal elections in Penang at the time of independence.

But historical legacies and structural pressures disposed Malaysia's developmental trajectory much more strongly toward ethnic affiliations and rivalries. And as this trajectory advanced through a critical juncture, sideroutes to multiethnic organizing were closed, hence encouraging the institutional formation of UMNO and other communally ordered parties. Beyond this point, it would have been difficult for elites, even had they wished, to turn back and reopen side-routes that had been sealed. Drawing on studies of political culture and cognitive science, Paul Pierson (2000: 260) argues that elites, in navigating complex social milieus, develop 'mental maps' by which to 'filter out disconfirming information'. And in forming institutions, they pay high start-up costs and undertake much learning, disposing them to observe organizational incentives reflexively (ibid.: 254–5). Moreover, their constituents, equally conditioned by legacies and pressures, make similar 'social interpretations'. And hence, once institutions have cohered, social 'outlooks ...toward political groups or parties are generally tenacious' (ibid.). In Malaysia, then, much more was involved than elite-level preferences and self-serving strategies when politicians in UMNO so rapidly galvanized ethnic followings, while politicians leading multiethnic parties, whether temperate in tone like the IMP or radical in their agendas like the Labour Party–Socialist Front, went just as quickly to ground.

The May 13th incident

A second critical juncture appears several decades later, again ratcheting Malaysia's developmental trajectory forward. Briefly, in an election held in May 1969, UMNO was abandoned by significant numbers of Malay voters, leaving the party clinging to power at the federal level, but gravely weakened (von Vorys 1975). However, this did not represent any shift in

mass-level outlooks and re-evaluation of ethnicity as an ordering principle for parties. Rather, just as the British had triggered a communal upsurge by their disavowing legacies and pressures when diminishing Malay standings, so too was UMNO now opposed by its followings for its slackness in raising Malay fortunes. And just as the British had responded to UMNO's formation by rescinding equal citizenship rights for the Chinese, so now would politicians in UMNO respond to their electoral setback and the violence that followed by reining in Chinese business activities. In this way, UMNO set to re-energizing its Malay followings through intrusive redistributive programs.

Thus, on one level, these events might seem less a critical juncture than merely a correction, restoring a trajectory originating in legacies and pressures, streamlined through side closures, and firmed with incentives. But that Malaysia's progress had passed through a second critical juncture is made plain not so much by UMNO's intensifying redistributive policies, but by its profoundly reorganizing the party system again in order to do so. Put simply, communal ordering would now be coupled with single party dominance.

As urbanization had accelerated during the decade after independence, Malays gravitated from the rice fields and fishing villages to the city fringes, there to gaze upon the relative prosperity enjoyed by the Chinese who operated in the economy's 'modern' sectors. And as ethnic affiliations and rivalries grew sharper, many Malays began to doubt the worth of the UMNO's holding state power, with the temporizing prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, seemingly less keen to remedy their economic 'backwardness' than to conciliate his non-Malay partners in the Alliance. Thus, after UMNO was weakened in the 1969 election, many Chinese who, despite the Tunku's benignity, had turned to new opposition parties, responded by mounting 'victory' processions in Kuala Lumpur, inflaming Malay sentiments and finally precipitating the May 13th incident.

Nearly two years of emergency rule followed the rioting, during which time UMNO politicians pondered their party's setback. And after bluntly locating its cause in ethnic resentments over material disparities, they acted first to co-opt into their ruling coalition, now rechristened the National Front, most of the communally ordered parties that had sprouted in opposition. In addition, they bolstered UMNO's standing within this coalition, raising it from *primus inter pares* to unchallengeable pre-eminence. Henceforth, politicians in UMNO would lay claim to top-line ministries and dictate policy directions. And though parliament was reopened, civil liberties and electoral competitiveness remained truncated. Accordingly, with UMNO's state power now heightened and insulated, its politicians marched forthrightly into local markets on behalf of their Malay followings. To this end, they hastily erected and freely accessed a range of new bureaucratic agencies, state enterprises, and business ventures, many of them cumulating in conglomerates, through which to implement the redistributive programs

and quotas that were collectively the New Economic Policy (NEP) (Gomez and Jomo 1997: Ch. 3).

The May 13th incident, then, like the Union controversy before it, amounted to a critical juncture through which major institutional changes took place. UMNO deeply subordinated its coalition partners, ran down the opposition, limited civil liberties, then fused with the state apparatus and connected conglomerates. In this way, UMNO produced a party system that was not only communally ordered, but branded darkly with single party dominance (Case 2004).

As recounted above, Pierson (2000: 254–5) argues that after a critical juncture, such institutional arrangements as take shape 'generate powerful inducements that reinforce their own stability and further development'. Thus, in cases like UMNO, Jason Brownlee shows more minutely how a ruling party's incentives guide the behaviour and perpetuate the loyalties of elites. Within this institutional arena, then, when competitions over positions and patronage are waged, whether everyday or epic in their dimensions, losing individuals and factions remain confident that they will later receive their desserts, hence deterring their defection. In Brownlee's (2007: 39) words, 'The party's members understand that no faction will indefinitely trump the others, and thus the organization's decisions will, over time, reflect its composition'. Similarly, in tracing relations between UMNO politicians and their subordinates in the National Front, Zakaria (1989) has identified a less even-handed, though still embracing principle of 'hegemony with accommodationist elements'.

Moreover, as we track UMNO's near fusion with the state apparatus and conglomerates, we are reminded of Douglass North's contention, highlighted by Pierson (2000: 255, quoting North 1990: 95), that 'institutional arrangements induce complementary organizational forms', hence cumulating in an 'interdependent web [that] "produces massive increasing returns"'. In other words, an institution's self-reinforcing mechanisms multiply exponentially as it interlocks with other institutions. Thus, in the Malaysian case, James V. Jesudason (1996), in elaborating the coincidence between UMNO, the state apparatus, the world of business, and vast ethnic followings, has devised a highly influential model of state 'syncretism'. In this conceptualization, through its marshalling of public resources, resonating appeals, absorptive ideologies, and disciplining instruments, UMNO has perpetuated elite-level loyalties and mass-level support, or at least indifference.

In sum, legacies, pressures, and closures have cumulated in a factor matrix in which Malaysia's institutions have gained grounding. UMNO's formation first centred a communally ordered party system. And its near fusion with the state apparatus, encouraging tight positional overlap and resource extraction, imposed single party dominance. Let us turn now to the ways in which these key institutions – a communally ordered, but not uncompetitive party system, and a single party that has been hegemonic,

but not omnipotent – have generated incentives whereby elite-level agency, hemmed in by pressures for both authoritarian and democratic politics, has extended a trajectory toward an intermediate regime outcome.

Elite-level agency

In his influential study of different rates of investment reversal during the financial crisis, Andrew MacIntyre (2001: 82) offered a useful additive to the accounts that economists had given. Put simply, through an institutional approach, he sought to correct for their 'deaf[ness] to the politics of the story'. In brief, in country cases where the institutional architecture was dispersed, thus fostering many veto players in government, policy might normally be stable, but risked rigidity during a crisis. Conversely, where the architecture was concentrated, hence supporting few veto players, policy responses were normally flexible, but risked volatility. At the poles, of course, neither configuration was favourable for investor sentiment.

In this understanding, formal institutions underpin elite statuses, then provide the arenas in which elite competitions take place. In countries like Thailand and the Philippines, MacIntyre (2001: 91–2) counts multiple arenas in executive offices, legislative chambers, political parties, and sometimes judiciaries. But in Malaysia's highly concentrated institutional setting, only one such arena existed – 'UMNO leadership'. Thus, in explaining the volatility of Malaysia's policy response to the crisis, contrasting with policy rigidity in Thailand and stability in the Philippines, MacIntyre focuses on the very small number of veto players that the country's lone arena supported, most notably, the prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and his deputy and finance minister, Anwar Ibrahim.[2] And as the relative standings of these two elites fluctuated, policy responses swung commensurately between Mahathir's near autarkic reactions and Anwar's new market orientations. Investors thus grew far more alarmed over elite-level rivalries and political uncertainties than objective economic conditions had warranted.

In his investigation of authoritarian durability, Brownlee (2007) also takes an institutional approach. Thus, in his case study of Malaysia, he too focuses on UMNO, though reaches quite different conclusions than MacIntyre. In particular, Brownlee is less struck by the elite-level vetoes that rock policy responses to crisis than he is in the longer continuities in elite-level relations that have perpetuated political stability. UMNO, through its institutional incentives, far from dividing elites, has unified them.

To show this, Brownlee reconstructs another leadership challenge to Mahathir, one that occurred in the aftermath of an earlier economic crisis during the mid-1980s. Brownlee traces the ways in which this challenge was resolved, with those who had mounted it, led this time by the trade and industry minister, purged from UMNO and starved of patronage, encouraging them to return to the fold some years later. But in addressing MacIntyre's concerns head on, Brownlee might have focused more closely

on the precipitating crisis. Notwithstanding the leadership challenge, Mahathir and his finance minister, Daim Zainuddin, together the chief veto players in UMNO leadership, succeeded this time in reassuring investors with a strikingly flexible and coordinated policy response. In brief, they decided abruptly to hold the NEP's strictures and quotas in 'abeyance' (Milne 1986), enabling the government to cut expenditures, while permitting investors to operate more freely. And as investors were duly enticed, Malaysia was soon launched on a decade of high-speed economic expansion.

MacIntyre and Brownlee are both right to stress the tightness of Malaysia's elite-level configuration. But with MacIntyre arguing that Malaysia's concentrated institutional architecture has bred momentous conflict, and Brownlee arguing that it has encouraged sustained forbearance, it may be that in focusing so tirelessly on institutions, they have each missed a key intervening variable of elite-level agency. Malaysia's institutional architecture has remained largely unchanged since the inception of single party dominance. But if the prime minister and his finance minister clashed mightily during the 1990s, they had cooperated closely a decade earlier.

Thus, while institutions underpin elite statuses and host elite-level interactions, the intensity with which competitions take place cannot be reduced to institutional architecture. Though conditioned by legacies, pressures and closures, then guided by institutional incentives, elites retain much autonomy in the conduct of their relations. During the 1990s, when Anwar cast the veto that his institutional standing allowed, he was driven to challenge Mahathir by some combination of personal ambition, the impatience of his factional supporters, and an atavistic sense of financial probity, derived, perhaps, from his early Islamic and student commitments, so long obscured by his ceaseless and intricate dealings in UMNO's leadership arena. By contrast, during the 1980s, Daim had been restrained by his friendship with Mahathir, his preference for the role of grey eminence, and a willingness to slash budgets that fell well short of any serious commitments, whether recurring or newfound, to deeper reforms that would harm his protégés.

Thus, it is not useful to see elites as being tethered ineluctably to institutional bases and dynamics that make them behave in either conflictive or cooperative ways. Though their personal preferences are constrained by developmental trajectories and the institutions that signpost them, elites possess autonomy enough that they can conduct variable relations with other elites. And these relations determine far more than specific policy responses. They impact profoundly on the stability of their political regime.

At this level, ranging well outside formalized committees and voting, there are no analytical models with which reliably to capture the slippage between institutions and the elites that they underpin. In the face of contingency, then, probably the most that can be done is to make broad estimations about the extent of elite-level unity or disunity. Elites are understood

by Higley and Burton (2006: 7) as persons who hold top-most positions in 'powerful organizations and movements'. Further, where elites demonstrate restraint and forbearance, they form a configuration of unity, derived from epic compromises that have variously been cast as 'settlements' and pacts (Higley and Burton 2006: 64–8; Karl 1987). But in most cases, no such resolution of elite-level conflict ever takes place. Rather, elites continue to compete ruthlessly, sometimes even murderously, therein perpetuating a disunity that Burton, Gunther and Higley (1992: 13) have identified historically as the 'modal pattern' of elite-level interaction.

How, then, might elites in Malaysia be characterized? To be sure, the struggle between Mahathir and Anwar, made manifest in their vetoing each other's policy actions, roiled elite-level relations. But so too had the leadership challenge that played out during the 1980s, even if Mahathir's finance minister had remained loyal. Indeed, each of Malaysia's three previous prime ministers, as well as Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Badawi, was confronted during their tenures by sharp challenges. But these episodes amounted to strain points, rather than breaks, in the country's longer record of elite-level continuity and regime stability (Case 1995, 1996). To be sure, they involved purges, even jailing. Yet they were each time followed by rehabilitations, preventing tensions from escalating into the open warring by which regimes are destabilized. Measured by the intensity of their rivalries, then, elites in the UMNO leadership arena, the broader web of the National Front, and across the state apparatus into the world of business and opposition politics have avoided modal patterns, instead maintaining their unity.

But if Brownlee is right about the unity between elites in Malaysia, he errs in ascribing this benignity solely to the institutional constraints posed by UMNO. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, elites in Myanmar, Brunei and perhaps Indonesia today perpetuate their unity without having forged any similar party. Further afield, forbearance between elites has persisted in paradigmatic cases like Taiwan, Senegal and Mexico, notwithstanding their ruling parties finally weakening and slipping into opposition. Two points stand out. First, in recognizing the autonomy with which elites can organize their relations, we avoid the determinacy for which a framework made up of legacies, structures, side closures and incentives is at risk. Second, as elites do this, we observe how in forming relations that can roughly be gauged as united or disunited, they affect the trajectory that leads to regime outcomes. Matrices of factors give rise to regimes of varying authoritarian and democratic dimensions. Relations between elites determine whether these regimes stay on beam or fluctuate widely within the parameters that factor matrices have imposed. In Malaysia, though endogenous elite-level rivalries have epically tested the regime, more fundamental unity has maintained a record of electoral authoritarianism. But in neighbouring Thailand, outright elite-level disunity, made manifest in military coups and popular upsurges, has instigated a jarring pattern of regime oscillation.

Regime outcomes and stunning elections

Simple linearity in developmental trajectories can also be frustrated in another way. Just as elites may act autonomously from the institutions that underpin their statuses, so may regimes break free from the elites who operate them. Political regimes must mainly be understood as outcomes, their authoritarian or democratic character deriving from factor matrices, their resilience dependent on elite relations.[3] But over time, regimes take on a life of their own, sometimes permitting what scope for civil liberties and elections they provide to spring back with independent causal force.

In its procedures, Malaysia's electoral authoritarian regime has been distinguished by very limited civil liberties, yet mildly competitive elections. Communication has thus been curbed through media ownership patterns, licensing requirements and sundry other prohibitions. Assembly has been hampered by arbitrary registration and permit requirements. Further, on the electoral dimension, multiparty contests have regularly been waged. But their competitiveness, though significant, has been dampened by an extreme malapportionment and gerrymandering of districts, manipulations of campaigning and voting rules, and a first-past-the-post system that greatly favours the ruling coalition (Gomez 1998). Taken together, these procedures exaggerate the government's standing, enabling the National Front not just to win every general election, but also, except for the contests in 1969 and 2008, to gain an extraordinary two-thirds majority in parliament, formally necessary for amending the constitution and emotively crucial for avowing paramountcy.

In his analysis, Brownlee (2007: 29–32) conforms rigorously to a conceptualization of regimes as outcomes. Thus, through statistical modelling, he seeks to demonstrate that governments operating electoral authoritarian regimes like Malaysia's do little to strengthen their tenure by waging elections that they reliably win. Their staying power derives instead from the prior elite-level unity that is forged through their key institution, the ruling party (ibid.: 42). Thus, where governments are stunned by elections that they have held, it is not because these contests pack any independent causal weight. Elections merely verify the erosion of any elite-level unity and ruling party institutionalization that has already set in. And so, Brownlee (ibid.: 9) writes, 'Elections under authoritarianism tend to reveal political trends rather than propel them'.

It would follow that transitions from electoral authoritarianism to democratic politics must begin within the ruling party, a notion that harks back to the broad claim made by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) that democratization is precipitated by the break-up of an authoritarian coalition. Jesudason (1996: 125) applies this logic steadfastly to Malaysia, arguing that given the presence of an encompassing syncretic state, '[P]olitical changes ... are more likely to come from the loss of coherence of the ruling coalition, particularly the UMNO, than from a more effective political opposition'.

But if regimes stand mainly as outcomes, we must recognize too the independent causality they can unleash, sometimes working back to transfigure the factor matrices and elite-level agency that precede them. In this way, we again raise our guard against a methodological error of irresistible teleological thrust. Specifically, along a regime's electoral dimension, much more can take place than the neutral measurement of candidate resonance with voter preferences. Simply in presenting an aperture through which appeals and preferences are expressed, elections may alter their dynamics. Put another way, as elections draw near, elites and constituents not only quicken their interactions as candidates and voters, they may be driven to behave quite differently than they otherwise would.

On this score, it is commonly observed that in advanced industrial democracies, candidates are prompted by elections to contort their long cherished positions, depending on the tack that other candidates take and the discrete audiences that they address. It is equally common that many voters, in order to avoid 'wasting' their votes on a favourite, but unviable candidate, adjust their preferences to accord with what they expect others to do, thereby collectively distorting results, especially in plurality systems, with a kind of 'lumpiness' (Pierson 2000: 258).

Further, under electoral authoritarianism, candidates and voters may change their behaviour even more. As we have seen, governments that hold elections in these conditions seek reliably to refresh their tenure. But sometimes, though competitiveness appears slight, opposition candidates and alienated voters may draw such spark from the very prospect of elections that they gather unanticipated numbers and courage, therein succeeding in changing the government and hence, the regime, a process that Schedler (2002b), borrowing from Tsebelis, characterizes as a nested two-level game of 'democratization-by-election'. To be sure, changes on these two levels may be lagged, rather than coterminous. And a dynamic may set in wherein the government tries first to steal the election that it has lost (see Thompson and Kuntz 2006), thereby so galvanizing constituents that they enlarge their roles from voters to street-level protesters, disaggregating coincident events into sequential ones. But even here, though concurrence may be lost, the precipitating role of stunning elections remains clear.

Finally, where elites and constituents are less cognizant of the game that they play, yet through elections the government and regime are still changed, the independent causality that such contests can impose is thrown into even bolder relief. The ruling party's candidates, unaware of the severity of voter grievances, cleave to their institution's procedures and mentalities. And voters, though alienated, remain aimless, dispirited by the seeming barriers to change that electoral authoritarianism has thrown up. Thus, with elites and constituents rendered nearly inert by their respective obliviousness and fatalism, explanation for any change that takes place must tilt further from the interactions between elites and constituents to the intrinsic mechanics of elections. Indeed, there can be no more compelling

evidence of a regime's separate causal force than the occurrence of an electoral fluke.

This paper argues that Malaysia's election in 2008, though candidates and voters might not have guessed it beforehand, may have initiated a transition from electoral authoritarianism to democracy, a striking counter-trend in the region's politics. To do this, it must be shown, in contradistinction to Brownlee that politicians in UMNO maintained their unity right up until election results were announced. It would help to show also that alienated voters, rather than seeking collectively to overturn the government, mostly acted individually to cast protest votes. And hence, with UMNO politicians avoiding factional behaviour and voters giving little thought to what others might do, they were all taken aback by what electoral authoritarianism now produced.

The 2008 election

In Malaysia's general election held in March 2008, the government was again returned at the federal level. And yet, it was dealt so startling a setback that its standing has continued to weaken. Speculation has thus mounted over whether this election has initiated a transition to democracy, however slow-moving, hence evoking the standalone impact that regimes can exert.

The government's share of the popular vote fell from the 55–65 per cent of the total that it has typically won to 52 per cent nationally, even less on the peninsula. Thus, notwithstanding the heightening effects of the plurality system, the National Front was able to claim but 63 per cent of the 222 seats in parliament, leaving it short of a two-thirds majority. When the government had been dealt a similar setback in 1969, it regained its footing by absorbing most opposition parties into its coalition, then subordinating them as lowly partners. But in 2008, the opposition was so invigorated that anticipation grew instead that it would instigate the necessary crossovers for it to form a new government. Among the opposition forces, then, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the largely ethnic Chinese, but secular and reformist Democratic Action Party (DAP) together boosted their total from 19 to 51 seats. But rising precipitously between these vehicles was the People's Justice Party (PKR), appealing mostly to the Malays, but avowedly multiethnic, and mildly Muslim, but urban and middle-class oriented. 'Advised' by Anwar Ibrahim, the PKR thus increased its total from a single seat to 31, qualifying it to lead the opposition at the federal level. Moreover, these parties together formed governments in five states, including two of Malaysia's wealthiest and most industrialized ones.

The results of the 2008 election, likened by DAP national chairman Lim Kit Siang (2008) to a 'political tsunami', astonished both UMNO politicians and voters. It had been expected that the National Front would lose some support among the Chinese and Indians, their perennial ethnic discontents

exacerbated by grievances over the government's mounting corruption and 'arrogance', spiralling inflation, and spiking crime rates. But the extent to which these everyday concerns would drive non-Malay voters into the arms of the opposition, and further, would come to be shared by some Malays too, had not been foretold in any serious analysis. Indeed, Malay voters, in swinging by an estimated five per cent against the National Front, fanned out now across the PAS, the PKR and in some districts even the DAP (Ong 2008).

In their jubilation, the opposition parties coalesced more closely as the 'People's Pact' (*Pakatan Rakyat*), centring on the multiethnic PKR. They began boldly to canvass their forming a new federal government. And in exploring new models for power sharing and policy making, they contemplated replacing the NEP with 'de-communalized' welfare distributions. Thus, as Malaysia's developmental trajectory started to reverse, local analysts imagined that communally ordered single party dominance might soon be replaced by two-party competitiveness (see Baradan 2008). And were the People's Pact to overtake the National Front in this way, its progress could be traced back to Schedler's construct of democratization-by-election. In this instance, then, Horowitz's (2000: 682) notion that in plural societies, 'elections commonly spur the very bifurcation that accelerates the slide away from democracy', would seem squarely refuted.

Thus, at the tail end of a lineal, but reversible framework, we encounter the independent causality with which a regime can spring back, transmuting the prior factor matrices from which the regime had derived. The blow dealt to the government in the 2008 election cannot be traced to any triggering disunity between politicians in UMNO. More striking than the factional scheming that reverberates through any political party was the habituated cohesiveness with which these politicians approached the election. Though some incumbents who had been dropped from the party list were doubtless disgruntled, most members still looked upon UMNO in just the way that Brownlee portrays, as a mechanism through which, so long as they remained loyal, they could extract largesse.

But thereafter, Brownlee stands challenged by the sequencing of events. Put bluntly, it was not any elite-level fractiousness that weakened UMNO, but instead UMNO's having been weakened by an election that tested elite loyalties. After the election, then, UMNO's leader in the state of Selangor, denied the chief minister's position, refused for a time to head the opposition in the state assembly. In two other states, politicians claimed chief ministerships in defiance of Abdullah, having been egged on by newly feisty sultans. Mahathir and his son, a top position holder in UMNO's youth organization, weighed in to demand that Abdullah resign – a call that resonated among some divisional leaders in the party's hierarchy. Abdullah vacillated, pledging first to transfer power to his deputy, Najib Razak, but then vowing to defend his post until after UMNO's party election at the end of the year (Vesudevan *et al.* 2008). Mahathir duly belittled Najib as a

'coward' for failing to stand up to Abdullah, prompting Najib to round on Mahathir.

But that the 2008 election posed independent causality is evoked by more than the obliviousness of elites beforehand and the fractiousness in their relations afterward. It is shown also by the near fatalism of constituents, for there is little evidence that as voters they paid heed to other voters, casting their ballots strategically in the hope of building momentum for change. To be sure, in their campaigning, opposition parties displayed new coherence and purpose, having been encouraged by Anwar to mute their ideological differences (Welsh 2008). Further, these parties effectively spotlighted the government's corruption. Even so, most voters responded less strongly to the appeals of the opposition than to failings of the government (Ong 2008). And in their atomization they cast protest votes, seeking individually to rebuke the government, not collectively to change it. Thus, the 'lumpiness' that appeared in the election results was unwittingly produced. It is difficult to imagine that in Perak, for example, the ascendance to the chief ministership of a politician from PAS, committed to the formation of an Islamic state, had ever seriously been contemplated by ethnic Chinese voters as they separately registered their grievances.

At this point in Malaysia's developmental trajectory, then, causality slipped even further from elites and constituents to the mechanics of the regime itself. Indeed, through the 2008 election, the trajectory was turned back, hence testing once united elites, animating once fatalistic constituents, and threatening the communal ordering and single party dominance of UMNO, the country's anchor institution. We see, then, how abruptly under electoral authoritarianism, even where resilient, elections may exert transformative impact, switching roles from regime-sustaining to regime-subverting.

Conclusion

In many developing countries governments that seek to perpetuate their tenures interminably have looked to electoral authoritarianism for new efficiencies. But our analysis of Malaysia might caution these governments on two counts. First, much more than elite-level preferences matter for electoral authoritarian regimes to gain resilience. Second, even where resilience has long been established, the slight aperture of competitiveness that distinguishes this regime type can usher in change.

To show this, the main aim of this paper has been to forge from existing models a framework by which to account for a developmental trajectory that has led to electoral authoritarianism in the paradigmatic case of Malaysia. It has thus drawn on notions of historical legacies and structural pressures, critical junctures and side-closures, institutional incentives and elite-level autonomy, and regime outcomes and stunning elections. But only preliminary, this framework produces a mostly linear, if reversible account,

rather than any complex multivariate explanation. Its constitutive models have been simply sequenced, rather than tightly integrated, then stationed along Malaysia's developmental trajectory where they have been best able to generate analytical power.

Though limited, this framework is diachronic, extending the opening dynamics that it identifies across time. And in doing this, its application of successively finer models tightens explanation, until rubbing against an irreducible stream of contingency. Through this approach we thus recognize that between the parameters that legacies, pressures, closures, and incentives impose, helping shape a regime's authoritarian or democratic dimensions, elites still order their relations autonomously. And in competing first for state largesse, but also in late industrializing settings for the fruits of connected conglomerates, where elites demonstrate restraint their regime remains resilient. But where they war openly, their regime fluctuates within a wide band.

In Malaysia, then, a matrix of factors has produced an electoral authoritarian regime. Further, though relations between elites have been flecked with strain points, they have remained united at base, giving this regime resilience. However, though regimes must be understood principally as outcomes, they may gain a life of their own, finally posing enough separate causality that they test, even reverse developmental trajectories. Thus, in Malaysia, the slight competitiveness that electoral authoritarianism allows may have initiated change. And as causality works its way back more deeply, it may recast elite relations, modify institutions and even revisit the side-routes that had earlier been sealed.

More specifically, after Malaysia's stunning election in 2008, the de-communalizing of political parties and the de-centring of single party dominance has grown imaginable, ceding ground for multiethnic two-party competitiveness. But though our framework makes provision for such elections, it can predict their occurrence no better than can the oblivious politicians and fatalist voters who participate in them. Rather, its utility lies in its more modestly sketching developmental trajectories, yet acknowledging the causal backflows that can disturb prior matrices of factors, therein safeguarding against unshakeable determinacy.

Notes

1 James Mahoney (2000: 513) identifies critical junctures as moments wherein path dependence coheres in the formation of new institutional arrangements. He argues that these 'junctures are "critical" because once a particular option is selected it become progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available.'
2 Although Malaysia was hit less hard by the Asian financial crisis than Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea were, enabling it to avoid intervention from the International Monetary Fund, asset and currency valuations still plummeted. For a comparative analysis, see Haggard (2000), especially Chapters 2–3.

3 Dogan and Higley (1998: 20) define a political regime as 'the basic pattern by which government decision-making power is organized, exercised, and transferred in a society'. And while acknowledging the many typologies of regimes that comparativists have constructed, they deploy the 'most familiar and basic one', encompassing monarchical, authoritarian, totalitarian, and democratic types.

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